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WHY PLAN SECURITY FOR THE MIGRATORY LABORER?

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by

Eric H. Thomsen,
Regional Sociologist
U. S. Department of Agriculture,
Resettlement Administration,
San Francisco, California.

INTRODUCTION

The invitation of your program committee to address the California Conference of Social Work was accepted all the more gratefully because I strongly believe that while effective solution of the problems related to migratory labor must be sought chiefly in other fields than that of social work, trained and experienced social workers come closer to having factual knowledge of the problems which must be solved. Moreover, I believe that those of us who through our work have come to know the conditions under which so many migratory agricultural laborers live and work should speak frankly of that which we see and understand until an aroused social conscience will demand to face the facts honestly and will let the facts determine effective action.

My topic is not my own; it has been assigned to me. By request of your program committee I am to direct our thoughts to the question:

"WHY PLAN SECURITY FOR THE MIGRATORY LABORER?"

I am not aware that anybody has done any serious planning for the security of migratory laborers. However, if we should suddenly discover that Washington or Sacramento really had planned adequately for social security, also for agricultural workers, whether resident or migratory,--well, why not? A birds-eye view of California agriculture will give us the background on which the contemporary drama of migratory labor is being played.

Irrigation and refrigeration made intensive cultivation possible in California more than half a century ago. Our intensive crops now form four fifths of our total crops and last year amounted to roughly half a billion dollars. California produces nearly half of the nation's fresh fruit, nearly all of its dried fruit and seventy per cent of its canned food. We now harvest one third of the nation's truck crop.

With intensive cultivation has grown concentration of ownership. The census defines large scale farming as a unit producing agricultural values of \$30,000 or over. Of 7865 such units in the nation, 2892 (36.8%) are in California. Less than one tenth (9.9%) of California's farms produce more than \$10,000 per farm, but these large growers produce more than half (53.3%) of the total crop value. The small farmers (41.4%), whose annual production was less than \$1500 per farm, produce only 5.9% of the total crop value. The pattern of California agriculture is one of a considerable number of very small units with a comparatively small number of large holdings, often under absentee ownership. The owner-operated medium-sized homestead type of farm is not characteristic of California.

Control is being further concentrated by means of current practices concerning the leasing of lands and the financing of agricultural operations. Thus in the Imperial Valley seventy-four truck growers are said on good authority to control 47,750 acres and fifty-three fruit growers, 31,224 acres. By such concentration of ownership and finance, nine tenths of the crops may be controlled by 127 grower-shippers, 75% directly and 15% indirectly through financial accommodations. Concentration of ownership and financial control is accentuated by high capital cost. The value of all improvements including irrigation, mounted steadily from \$9.95 per acre in 1860 to \$123.36 per acre in 1930 with a total investment of \$451,000,000.

This characteristic pattern of field factories in California agriculture has of course direct bearing on the whole question of agricultural labor. Two per cent of California farms control one fourth (25.4%) of the acreage, nearly one third (28.5%) of the crop value and pay more than one third (34.6%) of the bill for hired labor. In cotton less than five per cent (4.5%) of all California cotton farms are large scale farms, but they pay 40.5% of all cotton workers hired. Only seven per cent of all truck farms in California are large scale farms but they pay 56.4% of all wages for hired labor on truck crops. Of all persons gainfully employed in agriculture (1930) more than one half were wage earners in California (57.2%) as compared with one fourth for the nation as a whole (26.1%). Moreover, instead of the traditional hired man living with the family, large numbers of agricultural workers in California have been allowed to develop into a dispossessed homeless proletariat, lacking all the most elementary sanitary facilities indispensable to civilized living. All of which amounts to saying that when we think of security for the migratory agricultural laborer, even the most cursory review of the circumstances compels us to make our first broad observation, namely that we should plan security for the migratory laborer because

HE DOES NOT NOW POSSESS SECURITY.

In speaking to a conference of social workers I shall take for granted a great many things which with almost any other group I should not dare leave to chance. I shall assume, for example, that I need not recite at great length the more sordid details with which you are doubtless more familiar than I am. For the sake of our present discussion I shall confine myself to California, though I think we all understand that to a lesser degree the problem of migratory labor extends also to other states in the union, from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico.

Two years ago the labor demand for resident and migrant workers in California agriculture was officially estimated at from 46,448 in January to 193,349 in September. Last year 84,823 migrant agricultural workers entered the State of California in search of work, 85 per cent from the drouth states. Nevertheless, there was a shortage of workers in some areas for the demand for labor has grown tremendously because of the expansion in certain crops. The total irrigated area more than quadrupled from 1890 to 1930. Our truck acreage, for example, has trebled since the war, and sugar beets more than doubled. During the nineteen twenties cotton increased 150% in acreage but 400% in yield. The cotton acreage is still increasing rapidly and is one of the major reasons for the constant influx, at the rate of some two hundred a day, of workers from Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and other cotton states.

The labor demand is, however, sporadic and intermittent, resulting in much loss of time between jobs. In comparison with industry, agricultural laborers work long hours for low wages. Even when hourly wages are relatively high, annual family incomes remain low because of the general brevity and insecurity of employment. A study of 165 representative migrant families indicated an average income (for 1934) of \$482.50. The distribution of family incomes from July, 1934, to June, 1935, show that more than half of the families failed to reach the \$482.50 average; one out of every three received less than \$300; one out of seven received less than \$200. You will remember that these figures are

not individual incomes but represent a year's earnings for a whole family with an average of between two and three jobs per family. Even though wages have since been raised, you will recognize that by any civilized standard such low incomes result in bad housing and living conditions, malnutrition, low resistances to disease, inadequate medical care, irregular school attendance, and in general the almost complete absence of any satisfying family and community life. Even if decent housing were furnished migrant workers, such low incomes would still be inadequate. When good houses are furnished, rent is usually charged and tenure is arbitrarily determined by the owner. Most migrants live on roadsides (some in more or less primitive trailers, some in tents, others on the bare ground) or in squatter camps in shacks built out of any old rubbish, lacking the elements of sanitary living. Drinking water often has to be purchased at so much per bucket and hauled a distance. Others take water out of rivers or irrigation ditches for cooking as well as washing. Toilets are either lacking or completely inadequate, and in the absence of sanitary outlets dish and laundry water is thrown on the ground. Conditions such as these cannot but be a menace, not only to the migrant families involved but also to the entire community in which such deplorable conditions are allowed to prevail.

Working conditions are often no better than living conditions. Migrant agricultural laborers frequently work ten hours and there are few instances of pay for overtime. By modern employment standards the relation of the agricultural industry to its workers is characterized by poor selection and placement, lack of coordination of labor demand, instability and a consequently wholly disproportionate and wasteful turnover. The field has been and still is substantially unorganized. The activities of the IWW's a generation ago did not result in any permanent organization of agricultural workers. Since the War, A. F. of L. unions have come and gone; they have gained among the better paid workers in the packing sheds rather than among the field workers. Labor disputes have been frequent and often violent. They have usually concerned wages, recognition, working conditions and hours. They have been most frequently caused by inadequate or uncertain income, poor housing, lack of sanitation and lack of representation. They have been far less due to subversive agitation than to intolerable living and working conditions. Repression (as we might expect) has proven no solution of menacing problems with deep-seated root causes affecting a considerable number of insecure and underprivileged workers.

Whether the migrants work directly for the farmers or indirectly through labor contractors, the Workmen's Compensation Laws of California allow the employer of agricultural labor to post notice on his premises to the effect that he rejects the State's provisions for compensation. The Social Security Act protects millions of our people against the hazards of unemployment and old age, - but not agricultural workers. The Wagner Act which the Supreme Court has just declared constitutional guards millions of industrial laborers against unfair labor practices, but not the one fourth of our rural population who labor for wages as field workers in our largest industry. During their best years they have no accident, health or unemployment insurance; in old age nothing to look forward to except, perhaps, the poor house. There can be no doubt about it: in so far as we are now a nation consciously feeling our way toward necessary social security, we should certainly plan to include also the migratory agricultural workers who at present have nothing but insecurity. That, I think, is the chief point which we need to stress. So,

henceforth, when we are asked: "Why plan security for the migratory laborer?" let us answer frankly: "We should plan security for the migratory laborer for the primary reason that at present the migratory laborer has no security of any sort!"

However, because I realize that we are dealing with complicated issues which do not permit any of us to be dogmatic on either side, I should like to carry this discussion towards conclusion on a note of honest inquiry: "Does the migratory laborer necessarily have to remain insecure?" and "Can we hope to preserve our own security while we leave any substantial number of fellow citizens disinherited?" To ask these questions is not to detract from the accumulated evidence which establishes the migrant's insecurity beyond question. On the contrary, they suggest in relation to his insecurity secondary evidence which proves to be of primary significance to the rest of us.

"DOES THE MIGRATORY LABORER NECESSARILY HAVE TO REMAIN INSECURE?"

The answer must in our day and generation be an emphatic NO! Whereas former generations have suffered from inability to provide adequately for everybody, within this present century technological progress has enabled the human race to overcome that handicap. The problem is no longer inability to produce. Our best authorities say that we have already now as a nation (and have had throughout the depression) the plant capacity for reasonable abundance. What this means in terms of goods and services per family they variously estimate at from \$2000 to \$4700 per year. In terms of family living it means that the two-thirds of our population which must now live on levels below two thousand dollars a year are potentially within reach of twice the amount of goods and services which they now enjoy. When the President spoke in his inaugural address of the one-third of our nation which is ill-housed, ill-clothed and ill-nourished, he was referring to the bottom half of these two-thirds who now live below two thousand, -- to those, in fact, whose incomes never rise above \$1200. These include our migrants whose annual income seldom exceeds \$500. However, if we have almost within reach a potential plenty of at least \$2000 per family per year there is no longer any earthly reason why workers indispensable to our nation's food supply should be expected to live on less than five hundred.

As a matter of fact it would be a national waste to continue such inadequate living standards. Dr. Paul Taylor has estimated the average annual income for a migratory family at between \$350 and \$400. We are probably quite conservative in thinking of it as not exceeding \$500 per year. The inadequacy of such an income is best illustrated by the \$780 which (in 1935) the SRA considered the least on which an average (4.5 person) family could get along. The Heller Committee for Research in Social Economics of the University of California estimated \$1080 as the amount needed even by a dependent family of five persons, basing the budget on November, 1935, prices. Based on today's prices it would presumably have to be even larger, with the migrants still averaging less than five hundred. But our experts say that there is no longer any need to suffer such disastrous limitation because we are already able to produce at least two thousand dollars worth of goods and services per family. To say this is not to advocate some absurd utopian scheme; it amounts merely to saying that whereas in the past we could produce only enough to make less than one-third of the population comfortable, now we have the capacity to enable everybody to observe

standards of decent human living, - if we use our productive plant to capacity. Our real difficulty is that while our present productive capacity travels at high speed and up to date, we are mired with the rest of our economic machine in futile attempts to adjust its obsolete scarcity gears to our present need for widespread distribution with which to sustain mass production.

In the classical terminology of social work, we need not worry about our migrant being defective or delinquent for we know in our own experience that usually he is neither. At present he is often dependent, not from lack of resourcefulness as much as from lack of opportunity, but we have just seen that he does not need to remain dependent. Does the migratory laborer have to remain insecure? The answer is: No, not necessarily!

IF WE LEAVE THE MIGRANT INSECURE, CAN WE REMAIN SECURE?

Can any of us hope to preserve our own security as long as we leave the majority of the population insecure? Few things are as obvious today as the difficulty of maintaining any sort of social or economic equilibrium in a world in which millions are not even able to make sure of their most basic daily needs. When depression descended upon us like a ghastly nightmare there were those who thought they could still go on daydreaming by virtue of continuous dividends on more or less remote investments -- until it was suddenly discovered that banks failed, insurance companies collapsed, the stock market dropped 83%, the national income fell from 81 to 39 billion dollars, the unemployed grew to between a third and one-half of those normally gainfully employed; securities had become highly insecure and dividends dried up at the source. We discovered, in other words, that prosperity depends primarily on a healthy balance of production with consumption, and that when we reduce one-half of the people to paupers, the other half can have no dependable security. There were disastrous future social as well as present economic effects. The National Youth Administration, for example, discovered that of approximately twenty million youths between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, roughly five million were out of school and unemployed as late as the spring of 1935, and nearly three million of them were on relief. Of nearly a million and three-quarters eligible for work relief shortly before the inception of the W.P.A. nearly one-third (625,000) had never held a job or had any sort of work experience. The President's Committee on Farm Tenancy found the insecurity of fully half the total farm population of the country "A threat to the integrity of rural life"; farmers left with little more than one fifth equity in their farms, and nearly eighty per cent in the hands of landlords and mortgage holders. More than one-fourth of all persons gainfully employed in agriculture in 1930 were landless farm laborers dependent on irregular employment; large numbers of tenants and small owners had been sold out and become homeless migratory laborers. Add thereto the millions who are unemployed in industry and you have a picture of from one-third to one-half of the total population left with no stake in a house or home, no interest whatever in the preservation of the status quo. Social security may have been considered in the past a desirable but impractical ideal. Social security has today become imperative and must be made practicable. Moreover, it must be made to operate much closer than 65 to the actual age of 45 to 50 when men begin to be shelved under modern industrial conditions.

In such circumstances as I have just reviewed, can any of us be sure of having any security as long as we leave these many others without it? History records in part that the masses have usually been insecure. Until the present generation they understood that it was technically impossible to meet everybody's need; and the governing group, by hiding from itself the ugliest realities of its social life, managed to preserve its self-respect. Not so today when growing multitudes know that their needs can now be met and even men of great wealth have come to think their riches a badge of doubtful merit. For history also reminds us that the masses have been unwilling to put up indefinitely with unnecessary want and misery. Whenever the social intelligence of the old order has been sufficient to adapt itself to the new, progress rather than disaster has resulted from change. Only, as in Old Russia, when a reactionary, unimaginative ruling caste blindly resists everything new is it entirely wiped out. The trouble with history is that it is valuable chiefly in situations which defer to precedent. When life enters into new creative periods, of which the present is undoubtedly one, the past can offer only negative direction. We live in a world so changed that precedent is of very little value and we must increasingly use intelligence. History then, insofar as it is a usable guide, may tell us what to avoid rather than what to do.

We are living under terrific strain these days. We are, nevertheless, members of a generation whose priceless privilege it is to see life surging up on all sides of us, challenging our imagination, daring our courage, offering us with lavish hand and scant restraint everything we have it in us to become, urging us on to become more than we have ever yet dared to be. The only burden life charges us with in return for all this is the burden of choice from among the various possibilities offered. We must choose, and take the consequences. In the past we have hesitated to choose what we really wanted, and not quite realized the error of our choice until we were called upon to pay for what we really did not want. The burden and its strain remain; in the midst of confused counsel and conflicting loyalties we are daily called upon to make wise choices without previous certainty that we shall be right. To a group of social workers this fact should not be as terrifying as it is to many others. For the whole development of social work has itself come about that way, often forced and under fire. Dire need is always imperative and never quite waits until we learn how to do our job well. Hence the task of economic reconstruction is much like building a new highway while maintaining traffic on the old.

Is security obtainable in the midst of insecurity? The answer, I have tried to show, is that it is not. The present widespread dependency is our greatest national problem. It is an unprecedented problem of such magnitude that unless we solve it, it will dissolve even our most cherished institutions. Production is back almost to the level of previous peak prosperity but there are twice as many unemployed now as then. Unemployment has become a chronic disease within the present system and it, more quickly than argument, undermines what prestige the system might otherwise have left.

To solve this problem of dependency has become our greatest challenge. I began by saying that while solutions of our problems (of which our migratory laborer is only a minor though persistent reminder) must be sought chiefly in other fields, social workers usually possess personal knowledge of the problems which must be solved. Our perennial heartache comes from the discovery that on

important occasions forces beyond our control contrive to obstruct such drastic reconstruction as the facts demand. At other times we may be frustrated by the arbitrary decisions of little men who have by chance of circumstances been thrown into positions too great for their talents. But that is part of the difficulties with which we have to contend and which we must eventually overcome.

Meanwhile, recent evidence increasingly shows that the masses are again on the march. They have discovered that they need no longer remain subject to the material limitations of the past which makes it unsafe to predict that they will long continue to submit. The President pointed out on Pan-American Day that "Democracy cannot thrive in an atmosphere of international insecurity." No more does democracy survive at home under unnecessary poverty, insecurity and fear. The sit-down strike may be neither legal nor ethical. If it has, nevertheless, recently gained particular favor, it is doubtless because it has become a means by which disinherited groups have managed to obtain reasonable relief when more conventional means have proven futile. The success with which it has so far met indicates that the marching masses are determined to obtain whatever potential plenty is now within their reach; which suggests that in the modern world to rule -- in any sense -- has become "not so much a matter of the heavy hand as of the firm seat." Talleyrand had to remind Napoleon: "You can do everything with bayonets, Sire, except sit on them." That is still true whether you fight with bayonets or with pick handles. Hence rulers of modern industrial empires have wisely seen that there is little anyone can do with a considerable number of sit-down strikers except to sit down with them and talk things over, for to practice strong-arm methods is not only costly but ineffective.

CONCLUSION

Briefly summarized, what I have tried to say is (1) that the burdens of migratory laborers are inexcusable and unnecessary in the modern world, and (2) that together with countless other frustrated and disinherited fellow citizens our migrants form a considerable, dissatisfied element ripe for civil disobedience. I venture to suggest that their resentment promises no peace or comfort to anyone until fair grievances have been not only recognized but removed. What then must be done beyond periodic broadcasting of the facts? I think we must at all times and by whatever means it can best be done, champion the laborer's rights as a human being and an American citizen, and we may continue to raise relevant questions concerning his present condition. For example, is the position accorded the migrant laborer consistent with our professed American ideal of democracy? or with our equally widely advertised superior standard of living?

At present his right to combine with his fellow workers into labor unions is still contested and opposed by some. Yet it is more than a quarter century since Mr. Justice Brandeis stated before the House Committee Hearings on Investigation of the U. S. Steel Corporation:

"The question here is not so much the question whether the number of cents per hour ... is a little more or a little less. Whether it is enough, none of us are competent to determine. What we are competent to determine, sitting right here, as American citizens, is whether any

men in the United States ... are entitled and can safely determine the conditions under which a large portion of the American (workmen) shall live; whether it is not absolutely essential to fairness, for results in an American democracy, to say that the great mass of working people should have an opportunity to combine, and by their collective bargaining secure for themselves what may be a fair return for their labor. There is the fundamental question, and there is the question which is at the bottom of this situation. The denial of that right of collective bargaining is an explanation of the miserable condition of the workmen in the steel industry."

Mr. Justice Brandeis was then speaking of conditions in the steel industry and about a basic right of working men which the United States Supreme Court has since declared constitutional. We shall not be stretching his words beyond their obvious meaning if we were to apply them also to the conditions under which migratory agricultural workers still live and labor: They should have an opportunity to combine, and by their collective bargaining secure for themselves what may be a fair return for their labor. The denial of this right of collective bargaining is an explanation of the miserable condition of the migratory workers in agriculture. In view of the widespread national recognition of the rights of workers to combine for the purpose of collective bargaining, the right cannot fairly or safely be denied to agricultural workers. And is there any reason why the Social Security Act and the Wagner Act should not be amended to include agricultural workers?

Agriculture should be encouraged to diversify crops until the number of laborers needed in any given area may find therein the necessary employment to support a home and afford decent human living standards.

Governmental as well as approved private agencies should increasingly promote social stability and public health by making it possible for labor families to obtain decent homes within their means. This may involve the extension of federal credit to non-profit cooperative associations.

There is undoubtedly a job to be done in reclassification of the laborers themselves. We hear a great deal about misfits, but as social workers we recognize the obligation to discover latent powers no less than to identify weak spots.

At several points the problem transcends the State. Because industrial unemployment and regional disasters elsewhere have prompted many families to come to California, growers deny primary responsibility for the condition of migratory laborers. It is true that many have come because of unemployment, drouth, dust, flood. But this partial truth obscures the primary fact that migrants come here in search of work and remain because they find it, in spite of the conditions under which they are often asked to work and live. The SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE six weeks ago observed editorially that "armies of migratory workers are living under conditions that would not be tolerable in pigpens. The condition is horrifying to every humane instinct and a deadly menace to health, not to the miserable camp occupants alone but also the residents of wide areas. Further, there is being bred a spirit of revolt and despair that is a vicious

and unnecessary addition to the already abundant problems of migratory labor. ... It is a situation in which it will be the best possible politics to lay aside politics and meet an emergency that will not wait." Indeed it is! And generous action no less than straight thinking will be needed on every side of the issue!

Several things must and can be done. The only attitude which must inevitably prove abortive and disastrous is that which indiscriminately defies change and would hold off progress by sheer force. Upton Sinclair, after the sensation of *THE JUNGLE* twenty years ago is said to have observed that he "shot at the public's head and hit its stomach." Our risk is that in calling frequent attention to the disreputable conditions under which those people live who harvest and pack our fruits and vegetables we shall not strike the social conscience of responsible people within these industries, but only their pocket books. For there are those who frankly display no concern whatever for the plight of migrant laborers until by some association of ideas the thought occurs that it might not be profitable to force the problem on the nation lest once more the inquiry be directed not primarily into labor conditions but into the possible effect on consumers of unhealthy circumstances in harvesting and packing of the nation's food supply. The question remains: shall we plan security for migratory agricultural workers? The answer, I submit, is: Of course we shall! We are vitally interested in the circumstances which accompany our food at every step from producer to consumer. We know conditions among migrant workers to be outrageous and unnecessary, and we do not believe that obsolete maladjustments are conducive to social security and well-being.

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